



The Holy See

EASTER VIGIL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Holy Saturday, 22 March 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In his farewell discourse, Jesus announced his imminent death and resurrection to his disciples with these mysterious words: “I go away, and I will come to you”, he said (*Jn 14:28*). Dying is a “going away”. Even if the body of the deceased remains behind, he himself has gone away into the unknown, and we cannot follow him (*cf. Jn 13:36*). Yet in Jesus’s case, there is something utterly new, which changes the world. In the case of our own death, the “going away” is definitive, there is no return. Jesus, on the other hand, says of his death: “I go away, and I will come to you.” It is by going away that he comes. His going ushers in a completely new and greater way of being present. By dying he enters into the love of the Father. His dying is an act of love. Love, however, is immortal. Therefore, his going away is transformed into a new coming, into a form of presence which reaches deeper and does not come to an end. During his earthly life, Jesus, like all of us, was tied to the external conditions of bodily existence: to a determined place and a determined time. Bodiliness places limits on our existence. We cannot be simultaneously in two different places. Our time is destined to come to an end. And between the “I” and the “you” there is a wall of otherness. To be sure, through love we can somehow enter the other’s existence. Nevertheless, the insurmountable barrier of being different remains in place. Yet Jesus, who is now totally transformed through the act of love, is free from such barriers and limits. He is able not only to pass through closed doors in the outside world, as the Gospels recount (*cf. Jn 20:19*). He can pass through the interior door separating the “I” from the “you”, the closed door between yesterday and today, between the past and the future. On the day of his solemn entry into Jerusalem, when some Greeks asked to see him, Jesus replied with the parable of the grain of wheat which has to pass through death in order to bear much fruit. In this way he foretold his

own destiny: these words were not addressed simply to one or two Greeks in the space of a few minutes. Through his Cross, through his going away, through his dying like the grain of wheat, he would truly arrive among the Greeks, in such a way that they could see him and touch him through faith. His going away is transformed into a coming, in the Risen Lord's universal manner of presence, yesterday, today and for ever. He also comes today, and he embraces all times and all places. Now he can even surmount the wall of otherness that separates the "I" from the "you". This happened with Paul, who describes the process of his conversion and his Baptism in these words: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2:20*). Through the coming of the Risen One, Paul obtained a new identity. His closed "I" was opened. Now he lives in communion with Jesus Christ, in the great "I" of believers who have become – as he puts it – "one in Christ" (*Gal 3:28*).

So, dear friends, it is clear that, through Baptism, the mysterious words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper become present for you once more. In Baptism, the Lord enters your life through the door of your heart. We no longer stand alongside or in opposition to one another. He passes through all these doors. This is the reality of Baptism: he, the Risen One, comes; he comes to you and joins his life with yours, drawing you into the open fire of his love. You become one, one with him, and thus one among yourselves. At first this can sound rather abstract and unrealistic. But the more you live the life of the baptized, the more you can experience the truth of these words. Believers – the baptized – are never truly cut off from one another. Continents, cultures, social structures or even historical distances may separate us. But when we meet, we know one another on the basis of the same Lord, the same faith, the same hope, the same love, which form us. Then we experience that the foundation of our lives is the same. We experience that in our inmost depths we are anchored in the same identity, on the basis of which all our outward differences, however great they may be, become secondary. Believers are never totally cut off from one another. We are in communion because of our deepest identity: Christ within us. Thus faith is a force for peace and reconciliation in the world: distances between people are overcome, in the Lord we have become close (cf. *Eph 2:13*).

The Church expresses the inner reality of Baptism as the gift of a new identity through the tangible elements used in the administration of the sacrament. The fundamental element in Baptism is water; next, in second place, is light, which is used to great effect in the Liturgy of the Easter Vigil. Let us take a brief look at these two elements. In the final chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, there is a statement about Christ which does not speak directly of water, but the Old Testament allusions nevertheless point clearly to the mystery of water and its symbolic meaning. Here we read: "The God of peace ... brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant" (13:20). In this sentence, there is an echo of the prophecy of Isaiah, in which Moses is described as the shepherd whom the Lord brought up from the water, from the sea (cf. 63:11). And Jesus now appears as the new, definitive Shepherd who brings to fulfilment what Moses had done: he leads us out of the deadly waters of the sea, out of the waters of death. In this context we may recall that Moses' mother placed him in

a basket in the Nile. Then, through God's providence, he was taken out of the water, carried from death to life, and thus – having himself been saved from the waters of death – he was able to lead others through the sea of death. Jesus descended for us into the dark waters of death. But through his blood, so the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, he was brought back from death: his love united itself to the Father's love, and thus from the abyss of death he was able to rise to life. Now he raises us from the waters of death to true life. This is exactly what happens in Baptism: he draws us towards himself, he draws us into true life. He leads us through the often murky sea of history, where we are frequently in danger of sinking amid all the confusion and perils. In Baptism he takes us, as it were, by the hand, he leads us along the path that passes through the Red Sea of this life and introduces us to everlasting life, the true and upright life. Let us grasp his hand firmly! Whatever may happen, whatever may befall us, let us not lose hold of his hand! Let us walk along the path that leads to life.

In the second place, there is the symbol of light and fire. Gregory of Tours (4th century) recounts a practice that in some places was preserved for a long time, of lighting the new fire for the celebration of the Easter Vigil directly from the sun, using a crystal. Light and fire, so to speak, were received anew from heaven, so that all the lights and fires of the year could be kindled from them. This is a symbol of what we are celebrating in the Easter Vigil. Through his radical love for us, in which the heart of God and the heart of man touched, Jesus Christ truly took light from heaven and brought it to the earth – the light of truth and the fire of love that transform man's being. He brought the light, and now we know who God is and what God is like. Thus we also know what our human situation is: what we are, and for what purpose we exist. When we are baptized, the fire of this light is brought down deep within ourselves. Thus, in the early Church, Baptism was also called the Sacrament of Illumination: God's light enters into us; thus we ourselves become children of light. We must not allow this light of truth, that shows us the path, to be extinguished. We must protect it from all the forces that seek to eliminate it so as to cast us back into darkness regarding God and ourselves. Darkness, at times, can seem comfortable. I can hide, and spend my life asleep. Yet we are not called to darkness, but to light. In our baptismal promises, we rekindle this light, so to speak, year by year. Yes, I believe that the world and my life are not the product of chance, but of eternal Reason and eternal Love, they are created by Almighty God. Yes, I believe that in Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, in his Cross and resurrection, the face of God has been revealed; that in him, God is present in our midst, he unites us and leads us towards our goal, towards eternal Love. Yes, I believe that the Holy Spirit gives us the word of truth and enlightens our hearts; I believe that in the communion of the Church we all become one Body with the Lord, and thus we encounter his resurrection and eternal life. The Lord has granted us the light of truth. This light is also fire, a powerful force coming from God, a force that does not destroy, but seeks to transform our hearts, so that we truly become men of God, and so that his peace can become active in this world.

In the early Church there was a custom whereby the Bishop or the priest, after the homily, would cry out to the faithful: "*Conversi ad Dominum*" – turn now towards the Lord. This meant in the first

place that they would turn towards the East, towards the rising sun, the sign of Christ returning, whom we go to meet when we celebrate the Eucharist. Where this was not possible, for some reason, they would at least turn towards the image of Christ in the apse, or towards the Cross, so as to orient themselves inwardly towards the Lord. Fundamentally, this involved an interior event; *conversion*, the turning of our soul towards Jesus Christ and thus towards the living God, towards the true light. Linked with this, then, was the other exclamation that still today, before the Eucharistic Prayer, is addressed to the community of the faithful: “*Sursum corda*” – “Lift up your hearts”, high above all our misguided concerns, desires, anxieties and thoughtlessness – “Lift up your hearts, your inner selves!” In both exclamations we are summoned, as it were, to a renewal of our Baptism: *Conversi ad Dominum* – we must always turn away from false paths, onto which we stray so often in our thoughts and actions. We must turn ever anew towards him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We must be converted ever anew, turning with our whole life towards the Lord. And ever anew we must withdraw our hearts from the force of gravity, which pulls them down, and inwardly we must raise them high: in truth and love. At this hour, let us thank the Lord, because through the power of his word and of the holy Sacraments, he points us in the right direction and draws our heart upwards. Let us pray to him in these words: Yes, Lord, make us Easter people, men and women of light, filled with the fire of your love. Amen.

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